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ABSTRACT

Failure to establish a strong relationship between attitudes and buying behavior may indicate that the personality-consumer behavior link is mediated by some social mechanism, such as differential propensities toward advice-seeking. Undergraduates (N=75) completed two measures of attitudes, a questionnaire consisting of 10 consumer decisions and the Dean's Alienation Scale to obtain measures of powerlessness and social isolation. A comparison of the highest 15 and lowest 15 scores on the powerlessness scale revealed that, although no statistical significance was found, the high powerlessness subjects tended to seek more involvement in the decision situation and to involve others more for information-seeking than for actual assistance with the decision itself. A comparison of the highest 12 and lowest 12 scores on the social isolation scale revealed a statistically significant interaction between social isolation and target of involvement. Analysis of responses from all 75 subjects revealed that ecological factors, i.e., type of decision, played a role in the involvement of others in consumer decisions. Results suggest the possibility of a social comparison role in consumer decision-making. (NRB)

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Personal and Ecological Factors in the Seeking of Assistance When Making Consumer Decisions: A Social Comparison Interpretation

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Running Head: Consumer Decisions

PERSONAL AND ECOLOGICAL FACTORS IN THE SEEKING OF ASSISTANCE WHEN MAKING CONSUMER DECISIONS: A SOCIAL COMPARISON INTERPRETATION

In recent years, social psychologists and sociologists have attempted to establish a relationship between attitudes and buying behavior (Kassarjian, 1971; Koponen, 1960; Myers and Gutman, 1974; Nicosia and Mayer, 1979; Rokeach, 1973; Wells, 1974.) Even though these attempts have met with some success, the correlations have been too small to be successfully used for predictive purposes. This failure to establish a strong relationship could indicate that the personality-consumer behavior link is mediated by some social mechanism, such as differential propensities toward advice seeking.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the variables involved in advice seeking for consumer decision making. More specifically, it was predicted that the personal traits of powerlessness and social isolation would play a role in consumer behavior via their influence on the propensity to seek advice, as well as, the target selected for advice. That is, it was predicted that high powerless subjects (Ss) would seek the involvement of others more than those who did not feel powerless. Furthermore, it was predicted that these same Ss would feel most powerless in the more difficult decision situations and would, therefore, seek more advice in that situation. In addition, consistent with Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, it was predicted that powerless Ss might experience their attitudes as an inadequacy of information more than an unfulfilled dependency need. In fact, it was predicted that high powerless Ss would seek help to the extent of acquiring information more than seeking actual participation in the decision itself.

In regard to the selection of target for advice, it was predicted that social isolates woul be more selective in the choice of a target. More specifically, it was hypothesized that social isolates would seek more advice from relatives or friends than from strangers. Finally, the selection of a target for advice was also predicted to be a function of the type of decision.

METHOD

Subjects

Out of a pool of 75 Ss, 15 high powerless and 15 low powerless Ss were selected to test the first hypothesis. The N was determined a posteriori to provide a 20 point separation between the groups. In addition, 12 high and 12 low social isolates, providing for a 20 point spearation between the groups, were used to test the second hypothesis. Finally, all 75 Ss were used in testing the third hypothesis.

All Ss were obtained from freshman and sophomore classes at an Iowa

college and a Mississippi University. There was no interest in separating the N along regional-university lines. Because some classes had only a few members of one gender or the other, anonymity was assured by not requesting gender information. There was an approximate balance of males and females.

Stimulus Materials and Procedure

A questionnaire consisting of 10 consumer decisions and two measures of attitudes was used in this study. The consumer decision categories included questions concerning the selection of a college, college major, bank, book, clothing item, recent movie, job, sporting equipment item, and vacation type. The Ss were asked questions regarding the extent (rating scales from 1 to 6) of involvement of family, friends, and others in providing information and actual decision assistance in these consumer decisions.

Dean's Alienation Scale (Miller, 1977) was also included in the questionnaire. This scale consists of nine powerless, six normlessness, and nine social isolation items. For purposes of this study, the Ss were asked to rate the extent of agreement with these items using a six point scale. The highest possible social isolation or powerless score was 54.

Miller reported that Dean's scale revealed split half reliabilities, when corrected for attenuation by the Spearman-Brown formula, of .78 for the powerlessness factor and .84 for the social isolation factor. Miller also reported validity information which consisted of correlations with background factors and the Adorno "F" scale.

RESULTS

For purposes of testing the first hypothesis, a split plot factorial analysis of variance was used (Kirk, 1968). The between group variable consisted of the top 15 and bottom 15 scores on the powerlessness scale. There were two repeated measures variables consisting of two levels of decision difficulty (college choice vs. the clothing decision) and two levels of the type of involvement (information provided vs. help with the actual decision itself). The dependent variable consisted of rating scales for the college and clothing decisions.

Statistical analysis revealed a significant main effect for the information versus decision assistance variables ($F=17,22, p<.01, df=1,28$). There was also a trend toward significance for the three way interaction ($F=2.95, p<.10, df=1,28$). The statistical analysis reveal statistically insignificant results for powerlessness ($F=.6075$, $df=1,28$), decision difficulty ($F=1.77.df=1.28$), interaction of powerlessness with decision difficulty ($F=.72, df=1,28$), interaction of powerlessness with the information versus decision variables ($F=1,32, df=1,28$), and the interaction of decision difficulty with the information versus decision variable ($F=,67, df=1,28$).

To test the second hypothesis another mixed or split plot factorial analysis of variance was used. The between group variable consisted of the top 12 and bottom 12 scores on the social isolation scale. There were two repeated measures variables consisting of two levels of type of involvement, as in the first design, and target of involvement (family, friends, or others). The dependent variable consisted of summations of all ratings for the 10 consumer decisions.

Statistical analysis revealed significant main effects for the information vs. decision ($F=27.95$, $p<.01$, $df=1,22$) and the target variables ($F=39.99, p<.01, df=2,44$). There was also a statistically significant interaction between the social isolation and the target variables ($F=6.06$, $p<.01, df=2,44$). Finally, there was a statistically significant interaction between the information - decision and the target variables ($F=5.80$, $p<.01$, $df=2,44$). The main effect for the social isolation variable ($F=.2757, df=1,22$) and the three way interaction ($F=1.63, df=2,44$) were not statistically significant.

Finally, chi square analyses were computed in an attempt to learn which targets were chosen for consultation when decisions regarding college choice, college major, bank, movie, and clothing item had to be made. These five decisions were selected from the 10 consumer decisions involved in the study because of their diversity and also the fact that they were decisions that all of the Ss had recently made.

For the question regarding information sources and decision participation sources for the bank decision, chi squares values were 63.24 ($df=4$, $p<.01$) ($df=4, p<.01$) respectively. In both cases relatives were very often targets for involvement. They provided considerable information as well as advice when the student selected a bank.

For the college question, chi squares of 30.60 ($df=4$) and 33.59 ($df=4$, $p<.01$) were revealed for the information and participation questions, respectively. Most students went to others (variable-relatives, friends, others, or alone) for information, but about half said they made the actual decision alone while the other half said they received substantial help from their relatives.

Another chi square analysis revealed that students went to others ($\chi^2 = 28.93$ with $df=4, p<.01$) for information when selecting a college major but typically report that they made the decisions alone ($\chi^2=33.39$ with $df=4$, $p<.01$). Similarly, chi square analyses revealed that students involved friends in the movie selection both in information ($\chi^2=44.28$ with $df=4, p<.01$) and the decision ($\chi^2=51.22$ with $df=4$, $p<.01$); and they involved friends and relatives about equally in making the clothing decision ($\chi^2=22.28$ with $df=4$), but there was no target preference demonstrated for the acquisition of information about clothing ($\chi^2=3,85, df=4$).

DISCUSSION

Although the first hypothesis was not statistically confirmed, the nearly significant three way interaction was in the predicted direction. Consistent with social comparison theory, high powerless Ss tended to seek more involvement in the decision situation. Also consistent with social comparison theory, the high powerless Ss tended to involve others more for information than actual assistance with the decision itself. Further research using an immediate decision, as contrasted to the recall of a decision, would be needed to determine whether social comparison actually plays a part in the behavior of the powerless personality, or whether the powerless personality simply 'recalls' in a manner consistent with social comparison theory.

The statistically significant interaction between social isolation and target of involvement also supported social comparison theory. It was demonstrated that even high social isolates involved themselves in social comparison activities. However, they directed their comparison to others with similar biological-social histories, i.e. the immediate family. Perhaps, as similar to the Lundy (6) conclusion, they used others less and families more because they felt estranged from the outside world believing only their families were similar to themselves; and consistent with the logic of the Gordon (2) study, being social isolates and probably unsure of themselves kept them from venturing out to strangers who were dissimilar to themselves.

Finally, ecological factors, i.e. type of decision, also played a role in the involvement of others in consumer decisions. In fact, the statistical results revealed a potentially stronger effect for the ecological factor than the personality factors. Again these results point to the possibility of a social comparison role in consumer decision making. The fact that advice and choice varied with the decision to be made is supportive of the notion that our social comparison processes are channeled or directed toward those with the most problem relevant information.

In conclusion, it was shown that personality characteristics may influence consumer decision making through their influence on the tendency to seek advice, as well as, the selection of advisor. However, it was also shown that ecological factors may have more to do with advisor selection than the personality factor investigated in this study. In summary, this study represents a beginning in the attempt to understand the factors involved in the seeking of help with consumer decisions.

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Footnotes

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